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Developing Student Autonomy Using Semi-autonomous Self-access Learning Tasks in EFL Classrooms

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Summary / Abstract

This research paper explores the process of designing and using semi-autonomous self-access tasks in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms to increase students' future autonomous learning behaviour whilst improving their English ability. The tasks are designed based on theories and concepts taken from the autonomous learning field, positive psychology, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005), and task-based learning. A convergent mixed-methods (Creswell, 2015) research methodology was used to explore students' perceptions and attitudes towards the tasks. The data collected (N = 43) revealed the students appreciate having a choice of task type to work on and also that they intend to continue to use the autonomous learning techniques learned in this study to improve their English ability.

Introduction

Motivating and guiding students to take control of their own learning should be a primary goal for universities around the world. This is especially true in foreign language education. This is because students who have self-directed learning tendencies are more likely to become more proficient than learners who rely purely on a teacher to improve their language abilities (Benson, 2011). This does not mean that teachers are not an important part of the language learning process; it means that as well as teaching language, teachers should also motivate and direct students how to become autonomous learners. The study and the concept of learner autonomy is broad and multidimensional. Autonomy is a holistic concept that is more than just allowing choice. It is about encouraging

learners to express who they are and what they want to do. This type of learning transcends any specific discipline (Kenny, 1993). If teachers foster an environment that encourages and rewards learning diversity, this could lead to innovation in static educational systems. This paper will explore various types of autonomous learning, the Japanese context, motivational theories which support autonomous learning, task-based learning, and then examine collected data that reveal students' perceptions and attitudes towards tasks used in a study conducted at a Japanese university.

Autonomous Learning

Holec (1981) described autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Autonomy is not about teachers relinquishing their responsibility towards educating students (Little, 1990); however, it does require students to detach from the idea that they need a teacher (Little, 1991). More recently, Little (2007) said many people believe learner autonomy is just about allowing students to make a choice, generally from multiple alternatives. This reduction in complexity of defining what autonomy is in language education has led to several authors (Holliday, 2003; Pennycook, 1997; Schmenk, 2005) questioning what exactly autonomy is. Autonomy does not have to be an absolute concept; it can be a matter of degree (Nunan, 1997). There are a vast range of adjectives that can be used to describe autonomous learners such as methodical, disciplined, logical, analytical, reflective, self-aware, curious, motivated, flexible, interdependent, persistent, responsible, venturesome, creative, confident, independent, skilled in seeking, knowledgeable about learning, and critical (Candy, 1991). An autonomous learner is a mixture of at least a couple of these adjectives. Autonomous learning is generally divided into two types: semi-autonomy, and full autonomy. Riley and Zoppis (1985) described students who work in self-access centres as semi-autonomous. Even though they are working by themselves, the materials in the self-access centre were prepared by a teacher. Dickinson (1987) describes full autonomy as a situation in which students are working entirely independent of a specific teacher or learning institution.

Benson (2011) lists six different approaches to developing autonomy. A resource-based approach is a focus on students having independent interaction with learning materials. A technology-based approach utilises educational technology to facilitate autonomous learning. A learner-based approach focuses on nurturing students' behaviour and psychology to develop autonomous learners. A classroom-based approach allows students control over course planning and

evaluation. A curriculum-based approach extends the classroom-based approach over the whole curriculum. A teacher-based approach looks at the role of the teacher in fostering autonomous learners. These approaches are generally combined. This study examines autonomy using a resource- and technology-based approach whilst fostering a learner-based approach in a semi-autonomous environment.

Self-access Learning

Self-access language learning (SALL), a term synonymous with learner autonomy, is a resource-based approach (Benson, 2011) to autonomous learning. Self-access refers to materials that are designed and organised in a way that allow students to select and work on tasks without the direct need of a teacher (Sheerin, 1991). Through interaction and experimentation with the materials, students can develop their own autonomy in a unique way (Gardner & Miller, 1999) whilst improving their language skills. This type of learning can raise language proficiency once the student is ready to be independent and deal with real-life materials and interactions (Benson, 2011). Resource-based approaches work well with technology-based approaches as the technology can allow for ease of access. Most publishers insist that computer-based materials are a great benefit for self-study (Figura & Jarvis, 2007). Computer-based materials can come in various forms such as WebQuests, publishers' materials, materials designed by teachers, and various language-learning websites. However, it should be noted that students may not understand the rationale to self-access learning and they may only equate it with homework. Other students may feel uncomfortable without the teacher telling them exactly what to do (Fisher, Hafner, & Young, 2007). This type of independent learning should be woven into a course and not be a complete standalone entity.

Japanese Context

Transitioning teacher-reliant students into independent autonomous learners needs extra consideration in countries where classrooms have traditionally been teacher-centered environments. This is especially true for students who have progressed through the public Japanese high school system and are now studying at a Japanese university. Confucius values instilled in these students have influenced them to respect and obey teachers without question (Stapleton, 1995). Therefore, students who are accustomed to a teacher-centred education environment may need 'psychological deconditioning' (Holec, 1985) before they can

appreciate autonomous learning. For this study, self-access tasks designed to motivate and show students how to self-direct their learning were used in order to develop student autonomy.

Motivation

It has been said that before autonomy can occur, motivation is required (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). Many academics claim that learner autonomy is one of the most important concepts for motivating learners (Benson, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Pink, 2009). This has also been shown in various studies (Lamb, 2001; Norton, 1997; Sakui, 2002; Ushioda, 2003, 2007) that show when learners take control of their own learning, motivation is enhanced. Therefore, students should be given as much control over the learning content as possible, depending on the situation. McGonigal (2012) noted from her studies of positive psychology that people crave satisfying work, success or at least trying to be successful, social connection, and meaning in their lives. This is in-line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in which autonomy is said to be the central and most important concept (Pink, 2009). Based on cognitive evaluation theory and organismic integration theory, Deci and Ryan's (1985) SDT states that people are most motivated and engaged in an activity when it requires competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Even though SDT links motivation to learner control, it should be noted that some motivation researchers have been saying that motivation is a much more complex, multidimensional, situated and dynamic entity (Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015; Williams & Burden, 1997).

The self-access tasks used in this study were designed based on concepts and theories from positive psychology, SDT, and Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivation Self System. The L2 Motivational Self System is a framework that helps conceptualise students' L2 motivation. It is based on Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory and Markus and Nurius's (1986) concept of possible selves. The framework includes three components that are not mutually exclusive. The first component is the concept of "Ideal L2 Self" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 105). This states that when learners visualise the person they want to become in the future, they are motivated to become this person. Ideal L2 Self has been shown to be an important indicator of motivation (Ryan, 2009). The second concept is "Ought-to L2 self" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 105). This is related to instrumental motivation (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009) in which students are doing the activity in order to achieve some external goals such as passing a test. They are trying to become the person they are expected to be. It has been shown to be the least effective motivator in the framework (Csizer

& Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006). The third concept is the “L2 Learning Experience” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106) which “reflects the impact that the immediate learning environment might have on a learner’s motivation” (Aubrey, 2014, p. 156). It has been shown to have a major impact on student motivation (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Taguchi, 2013; Taguchi et al., 2009). The teacher, their methods, and the classroom atmosphere can all affect student motivation. Many studies (e.g., McVeigh, 2004; Nakata, 2006) have shown that Japanese university students lack motivation to study English. This has led Japanese linguistic researchers to look more deeply at Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, specifically the Ideal L2 self. Their results show that students who are interested in relating to the English-speaking world outside of Japan by being interested in international affairs, travelling overseas, and interacting with foreign people are more likely to be more highly motivated to learn English (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, 2009; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). If tasks and activities in a learning environment can utilise these concepts then students’ motivation to learn English may rise.

Task-based Learning

The self-access tasks used in this study were designed based on the motivational theories of SDT, the L2 Motivational Self System, and positive psychology. The tasks should be challenging, but not too difficult. The tasks require students to work independently whilst giving them a choice of content. The tasks are related to students’ lives, now and in the future. Finally, the tasks encourage students to interact with various people in a positive way which would hopefully make students feel better about their own lives. Through tasks designed to motivate and improve the English ability of students, the researcher is also encouraging students to become autonomous learners by showing students how they can find their own learning materials such as podcasts, interviews, websites, and more.

Research Objectives

The three research questions below were chosen in order to achieve the objective of this study which was to determine students’ perceptions and attitudes towards the self-access tasks. More specifically, will students continue to independently do these types of activities in the future?

- RQ1. In the future, do students intend to do the self-access semi-autonomous learning tasks introduced in this course?
- RQ2. Did students like having a choice as to which tasks to work on during this course?
- RQ3. What are students' opinions towards the tasks?

Method

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods (Creswell, 2015) research design was used in this study. RQ1 and RQ2 collected quantitative data utilising Likert scale questions and statements to gauge student opinion. RQ3 collected and analysed qualitative data in order to get a deeper understanding of student opinion. These two data types were analysed separately and later merged and analysed again in order to achieve the objective of this research study.

Research Site and Participants

This study occurred at a private university in the Kansai region of Japan. The teacher of this course, a native speaker of English, was also the researcher. The students who participated were studying in an intensive English course that met three times a week for two 14-week semesters. This study occurred in the second semester of the course. For the second semester, all teachers in the department were asked to implement a portfolio-based assessment based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR). The tasks completed in this course were used by the teacher to build the required portfolio.

A total of 47 students from two intact classes, both from the business, department participated in this study. Students' TOEIC scores ranged from between 450 to 650 on their original placement tests. 43 students completed the survey at the end of the semester. Of the 43 respondents, 24 were female and 19 were male. The students were 19 or 20 years old.

Instruments

A total of 20 tasks designed by the researcher were used in this study. Tasks were grouped into six thematically-organised categories which acted as levels. Each week, students were told to complete a task of their choosing. Students could not progress to the next level until they had completed at least two tasks in their current level. Various types of one-way and two-way tasks were used such as information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap. Each student had a personal blog which they used to display task completion. In the following week, students would show and discuss with other students how they completed the task. Tasks were evaluated depending on the completion requirements of each specific task. Each task was worth a maximum of four points. A student's 10 best tasks were used for their semester grading. A maximum score of 40 would be awarded to students who successfully completed at least 10 tasks. An example of one of the 20 tasks can be found in the Appendix.

A questionnaire was designed to measure student opinion towards the self-access tasks. The questionnaire contained 12 questions. The first part of the questionnaire elicited demographic information on participants and the second part consisted of questions related to autonomous learning. The second part of the questionnaire utilised a 5-point Likert scale in order to understand the degree to which students felt towards the statements; anchored by 1 (absolutely untrue) and 5 (absolutely true). Finally, an open-ended question collected qualitative data in relation to the tasks in order for students to share their true opinions. The questionnaire was administered in English but students were told that they could write in English or Japanese for the open-ended question.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online at the end of the semester in July 2015. Class time in a computer lab was given to students to complete the questionnaire. At the start of the semester, the researcher explained to the students the purpose of the research and obtained consent. Students were told to answer the questionnaire honestly and that how they responded would in no way affect their grading for the course.

Analysis

Data collected in response to the Likert-scale statements were averaged and the standard deviation calculated. This averaged data reflects a general perception about how the students felt towards the statements. More personal insight would come from the qualitative data. As the design of the tasks were based on various academic concepts related to motivation and task-based learning, content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. First, the theme was identified. After that, open-coding (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) was conducted by labelling each theme according to relevance of the study. Then, the data were categorised, tabulated, and analysed. Any comments that appeared only once were omitted from the data analysis due to a perceived lack of relevance and/or importance. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data would be discussed together in order to answer the research questions.

Results and Discussion

A comparison of mean scores collected in relation to RQ1 and RQ2 are presented in Table 1. The data collected from the 43 respondents show positive mean scores in relation to the autonomous learning activities. A high mean score was also recorded in relation to students having the option to choose which tasks they work on. Table 2 shows the results from the qualitative data analysis. The results are ranked from the most frequent comment to the least frequent comment.

Table 1. Mean Scores Related to Future Autonomous Learning (N = 43)

RQ1: Will you continue to do this type of activity in the future by yourself in order to improve your English?				
	Self-assessment and goal setting	English Central	Extensive Reading	Learning English-related podcasts
<i>M</i>	3.33	3.90	3.56	3.85
<i>SD</i>	0.94	0.86	0.85	0.84
	Study TED Talks videos	Speak English with foreign students	Online documentaries	Use social media in English
<i>M</i>	3.95	4.02	3.79	3.89
<i>SD</i>	0.90	0.81	0.82	0.80
RQ2: Did you like being able to choose which task to do?			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
			3.95	0.80

Table 2. Frequency of Comments Related to Tasks (N = 43)

RQ3: Do you have any comments about the tasks?	Frequency of comment
I enjoyed video making tasks (fun and/or good experience).	11
I did not enjoy video making tasks (time consuming and/or technically difficult).	11
I enjoyed the writing tasks.	9
All tasks were interesting. I enjoyed them.	8
I enjoyed tasks that made me think about life outside of Japan	8
I enjoyed tasks that utilised various media: TED Talks, podcasts, and news.	7
I enjoyed tasks in which I could help or learn about other people.	5
Tasks that made me think about my life and semester goals were good.	3
I could improve my English.	3
I enjoyed this course.	3
I improved my computer skills.	3
I had computer-related technical difficulty.	2

Even though still a positive score, the mean score recorded for the “Self-assessment and goal setting” was the lowest compared to the other activities. Three students wrote the comment of “tasks that made me think about my life and semester goals were good” in the qualitative data collection phase. This lower score could be because students are not yet comfortable doing this as a formal activity, even though they might informally do it anyway. Data collected in relation to the tasks about English Central and extensive reading were also positive; however, these results cannot be purely attributed to this study as students have probably had prior exposure and developed their own attitudes towards these activities.

The high positive mean scores collected about ‘Learning English-related podcasts’, ‘Study TED Talks videos’, ‘Online documentaries’, and ‘Use social media in English’ were backed up by seven comments of “I enjoyed tasks that utilised various media: TED Talks, podcasts, and news.” This shows that students like using new and various media to learn English and they intend to continue using them in the future to learn English. This is further backed up with eight comments of “I enjoyed tasks that made me think about life outside of Japan.” The tasks related to TED Talks and podcasts were some of the tasks that would make

students think about life outside of Japan. The highest mean score was in relation to “Speak English with foreign students”. This was backed up by five students writing that they enjoyed tasks which they could help or learn about other people. This indicates students want more opportunity to speak English with foreign students.

Two of the most common comments collected from the qualitative data indicate that half of the students either liked or disliked the tasks which required them to make videos. The students who liked making the videos said that it was fun and/or a good experience. The students who disliked making the videos said that it was time consuming and/or technically difficult. This is interesting because even though a student enjoyed an activity, it does not mean that it was a worthwhile learning activity, and just because a student disliked an activity, it does not mean that the activity is without merit. Quite often students can improve their skills and learn the most from challenging activities. Nine students also wrote that they enjoyed the writing tasks. All this data suggests that it is beneficial to challenge students with a wide variety of activities.

Below are some example comments written by students that exemplify the content analysis of the qualitative data collected in relation to RQ3. The grammar was carefully corrected by the researcher making sure the meaning of the comment was not changed.

- All tasks were interesting but I didn't like making videos.
- I felt that the more tasks I did, the more my English improved.
- Thanks to the tasks, I not only improved my English skills but also my computer skills!
- It was fun to do these tasks with my friends. My image of homework was that it is boring but this homework was not boring and I could improve my English skill.
- I liked the writing tasks because I can take my time. I didn't really like the tasks in which I had to make videos because it was technically difficult. However, it was good for me because my technical skills improved.

- I loved the TED Talks tasks because it was a good learning experience. I didn't like the tasks in which I had to make narrated PowerPoint presentations because they were difficult to make.

Conclusion

In the Japanese context, students are probably more accustomed to an environment where a teacher explicitly dictates perceived necessary knowledge. In the type of environment in which this study occurred, as this type of task-based learning may be new to some students, it is important for teachers to explain to students the purpose and rationale of the tasks. Teachers need to motivate and show their students how they can take control of their own learning. Instilling autonomous learning skills and tendencies into students at the youngest age appropriate will be rewarded in the future. Allowing students a choice, or at least the illusion of choice, will encourage them to take ownership of their work. Data presented by Philpott (2015) showed that by designing tasks based on positive psychology, SDT, and the L2 Motivational Self System can be an effective way to motivate students and make them think about their life and lives of other people more. Giving students the opportunity to share their work with other people will also give it more meaning.

This study investigated students' attitudes and perceptions towards various semi-autonomous self-access learning tasks. The data collected were generally positive and it indicated which activities students enjoyed more than others. The data suggested that it is good for a teacher to use a variety of different media to teach students and also that students appreciate having a choice about what specific activities they do. Data collected from this study could be used by people who are designing and managing self-access centers and by teachers who are looking for new and interesting ways to teach their students. Future studies based on this paper could include collecting data about what autonomous learning skills and techniques students think they possess.

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Appendix

Quest 16: Learning English Podcasts

Goal: Find, listen, and review 3 different podcasts that can be used for learning English.

Length: Similar length to the **Example blog entry** below.

Instructions:

1: To find podcasts you can do a Google search, use your Podcast App on your smart phone, or ask someone (friend or teacher) for recommendations.

2: In your blog, write a short review for each Podcast. In your review you should write the Podcast name, the Episode name or date, good points, and bad points. Finally, write about which one is the best for you and why?

Example blog entry

Podcast name: Bilingual News

Episode date: 03.05.15

Good points: In this podcast, 2 people speak about interesting news stories. They speak in both English and Japanese. New episodes are uploaded weekly.

Bad points: It is sometimes difficult to understand the Japanese. Some of the episodes are long.

Podcast name: JapanesePod101

Episode name: Lower Beginner: What have you got planned for this weekend in Japan?

Good points: Very good production. New episodes are uploaded frequently.

Bad points: It is too easy.

Podcast name: Learn Japanese Pod

Episode name: #110 tashika ni

Good points: The speakers are friendly and interesting. They clearly explain how to use a grammar point and then give good examples. The length of the podcast is also good.

Bad points: The grammar points are a little easy. They have not released a new episode for a long time.

My favourite podcast was the Bilingual News podcast. Even though it was quite difficult, it is a good challenge for me. Also, the topics they talk about are interesting. JapanesePod101 is too simple and Learn Japanese Pod have not released any new content lately.